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C O N F I D E N T I A L QUITO 002057

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/11/2017

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SUBJECT: ECUADOR CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS: ALL ABOUT
CORREA

Classified By: DCM JEFFERSON T. BROWN FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: The campaign for the September 30 Constituent Assembly elections is playing out primarily as a referendum on President Correa's policies, as polls indicate that most voters are ignorant of the candidates and their platforms. Although the President's popularity has inched down to 56 percent, that still puts him well ahead of all rivals. Strict campaign rules and the Supreme Electoral Tribunal's pro-government views have stacked the deck in favor of the Correa administration's Alianza PAIS movement. New parties and movements are handicapped in getting their messages out, which means that traditional political parties (although in disrepute) are likely to garner votes by default from those skeptical of President Correa. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal's perceived failure to control inappropriate government spending has led opposition parties to ask the OAS electoral mission for help. End Summary.

CAMPAIGN RESTRICTIONS: FAIR CHANCE OR NO CHANCE?

¶2. (SBU) In the name of fairness for those with fewer financial resources, the April referendum established severe limits on Constituent Assembly campaigning. Privately-financed advertising is prohibited. Parties and movements submit their campaign advertising to the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) for approval. The TSE then places the ads on television, radio, and billboards and in newspapers. This is the first time the GOE has financed campaign advertising, at a total cost of USD 30 million to Ecuadorian taxpayers.

¶3. (SBU) The result is that candidates have been forced to rely on organizing meetings, sending sound trucks down the streets to blast out messages, and campaigning door-to-door. Phone calls are another permissible approach. Eduardo Maruri of the New Option party (Una Nueva Opcion, or UNO), for example, told us he relied on personal meetings and a call center, campaigning seven days a week. In the interest of reaching large numbers of voters, campaign content is rarely more than the party name and list number, a handsome or pretty face, and a catchy campaign line.

¶4. (C) These campaign rules have put a premium on media interviews, which are not subject to limitations like candidates' own advertising. Media outlets are featuring a steady diet of candidate interviews and roundtables, but personal relationships and other factors come into play for someone to emerge as one of the few among the 3,200 candidates to gain these opportunities. For example, Humberto Mata of Ecuadorian Force (Fuerza Ecuatoriana) told us that payments were being made to some outlets as the way

to gain interview slots.

CORREA REMAINS ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

¶5. (SBU) While other candidates struggle to get their messages out, President Correa has used every public appearance, including his traveling Cabinet meetings and weekly radio addresses, to urge voters to support Alianza PAIS. He has been handing out housing certificates, promising free education, and attacking his opponents, while warning that the benefits his government provides would be lost without an Alianza PAIS victory.

¶6. (C) The Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) laid down a marker on August 22 that the government could not use state resources to promote assembly candidates, but has taken no action to enforce this position. Correa made clear he had no intention of complying, calling campaigning his "right and duty" and efforts to stop him "immoral." His spokesman claimed that Correa strictly separated his government work from campaigning. Reports of inappropriate use of government funds continue; for example, the prefabricated sections of the Assembly building in Manabi arrived at the construction site in Montecristi on August 30 on trucks painted with Alianza PAIS's colors and Correa's face. TSE president Jorge Acosta undermined the clarity of the TSE's earlier stand by announcing on September 3 that there was no legal prohibition against Correa appearing in campaign advertising, a statement that NGO Citizen Participation's Executive Director Jose Valencia disputed.

¶7. (C) As a result of the TSE's position, opposition parties have called on the Organization of American States (OAS) electoral mission to monitor the campaign and prevent

inappropriate government campaign spending. Democratic Left (Izquierda Democratica) party leader Andres Paez told us that the OAS mission needed to have started its work in Ecuador on August 13, the day the campaign began. Members of Congress from four traditional parties and the indigenous Pachakutik movement supported a September 4 Democratic Left call for OAS intervention.

POLLING SHOWS CORREA POPULARITY DOWN, VOTER IGNORANCE

¶8. (SBU) A Cedatos/Gallup poll, released September 2, showed President Correa's approval rating inched down to 56 percent in late August, continuing a slow but steady decline from a high of 76 percent in April. Cedatos president Polibio Cordova attributed the decline to Correa's overly confrontational approach.

¶9. (SBU) Cedatos' polling revealed that few voters knew candidates' platforms; only 21 percent could remember any concrete proposals from candidates. Campaign proposals that candidates are making have focused largely on promoting employment, fighting crime, and reducing prices rather than fostering a debate on the constitutional questions that the Assembly will have to decide. Patriotic Society Party (PSP) leaders Gilmar and Lucio Gutierrez, for example, are promising lower prices by pointing out how much lower prices were when Lucio was president. Only a few candidates, such as Cesar Montufar of National Agreement (Concertacion Nacional), have broken from this pattern and attempted to campaign on constitutional matters.

¶10. (SBU) Cedatos' focus groups expressed hope that candidates would come up with creative approaches to get around campaign restrictions, fearing that otherwise the result would be election wins by the same old politicians rather than new people with greater credibility. Jaime Duran, president of Confidential Report (Informe Confidencial), doubted this would be possible; he told us he expected new movements not affiliated with Alianza PAIS to be largely shut out of the Assembly. Several other analysts have come to the same conclusion.

COMMENT

¶11. (SBU) Given the strict campaign restrictions, thousands of candidates, and short 45-day campaign period, it would not be realistic to expect voters to become familiar with campaign platforms. As a result, the September 30 elections are shaping up in large part as a referendum on President Correa and his broad, but poorly defined, promise of change. A secondary factor will be name recognition, which favors established parties and perhaps a few well-known candidates from the new movements. It remains to be seen whether Ecuadorian citizens will see the resulting Constituent Assembly as the "new people with greater credibility" that many seek.

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